Greg Guirard has dedicated his life to preserving his beloved Basin.

BY DEBORAH BURST

Greg Guirard — a Cajun author, photographer and lecturer — has made preserving the Cajun way of life his way of life.

Guirard credits his grandfather and a Nobel laureate for inspiring his fiery passion to save his homeland, the Atchafalaya Basin. His grandfather, Wade O. Martin Sr., was a five-term sheriff of St. Martin Parish. The Nobel laureate is William Faulkner, author of Bear, a story of environmental awareness and responsibility.

Guirard's home borders the 833,000-acre Atchafalaya Basin Floodway, which is nearly 15 miles wide and confined by 449 miles of protection levees, the earthen fortresses that surround Louisiana's liquid borders. And Guirard knows every inch of this aquatic countryside.

Guirard's family set up their homestead outside Catahoula at the turn of the 20th century — a time when timber was king. The lumber lords decimated the Basin's giant cypress from the end of the Civil War to the 1930s. Guirard scoured the Basin as a child with his grandfather — hunting, fishing, learning the history, listening to the tales of nature. He never forgets his grandfather's words: "Wish you could have seen the swamp like I did." These words haunt Guirard as he finds himself repeating the same words to his grandchildren — tales of the Basin when he was a child, full of life and vigor.

Now in his 60s, Guirard holds a bachelor's degree in agronomy and a master's in English literature from...
Louisiana State University. He also possesses a rare fluency in the dying Cajun-French language. He's a strong-bodied man with broad shoulders and his bright eyes sparkle against the weathered lines of hard work on his face. His long silver hair and bearded face impart a wild side that refuses to settle down. Just three years ago, he canoed across the Basin on a whim with a journalist — an expected two- to three-day trip took only eight hours.

Guirard has left his homeland to explore worlds such as Belize, Costa Rica and the East Coast of the United States, but the swamps needed him more. He has lived and the East Coast of the United States, but yards from the bayou, Guirard, speaker, photographer, writer, actor, cattleman, carpenter, furniture maker, sawmill worker, crew-boat driver, crawfisherman, speaker, photographer, writer, actor and a technical adviser for film production. "I enjoy the photography the most," says Guirard. "Going out to the swamps is like a treasure hunt for me."

Guirard works hard standing guard over his 100-acre estate covered in cypress forests, groves of live oaks, sugar cane fields and crawfish ponds. He has been busy planting more than 40,000 trees. During the spring, a sea of thistle surrounds Guirard's nest of Cajun cabins and work sheds. Several shacks damaged from past hurricanes lay cruddled under fallen trees. Guirard's frayed bungalow sits several yards from the bayou, while just feet from the water's edge stands an authentic Cajun cabin featured in the Hollywood movie, Jailbirds. Resting quietly on the bayou under the guard of swarming trees, a houseboat waits for another adventure inspired by his book, Atchafalaya Autumn.

A staunch writer and photographer, Guirard's rustic-cabin harbors a collage of Basin photos, while scattered books and papers drown every inch of space. A shroud of curled, age-yellowed notes consumes the refrigerator while, like most country homes, the kitchen table offers a quiet respite for storytelling as Guirard describes this majestic wonderland.

The Atchafalaya Basin holds more than 170 species of birds with herons, egrets, hawks, owls and kites sailing the skies, some with wing spans of 8 feet or more. The Basin's sluggish fishmen catch catfish more than 5 feet long and garfish more than 10 feet in length, alligators 11- to 15-foot long weighing a ton and turtles at 100 pounds. Beavers, nutria, mink, otters, deer, bobcats, coyotes, Louisiana panther and the Louisiana black bear (a threatened wildlife species) all make their home in the Basin. Moved by the Basin's infinite beauty and dedicated to Faulkner's stewardship of preservation, Guirard records the sights and sounds in four self-published books.

His first book, Seasons of Light, debuts Guirard's photography with stories and quotes from Faulkner: "I long for a world in which people of power or wealth would value the serenity and beauty of nature as much as some of the people with less power and wealth and the desire to profit from the demise of nature." Guirard discovered his writing talents in compiling the book The Cajun Families of the Atchafalaya, a documentary of the timeless generations of Cajun lifestyles. Moved by the Basin's history and his childhood, Guirard wrote his first fictional book, The Land of Dead Giants. "It's an autobiography of my life growing up with my grandfather," he explains. Guirard says Cajun's hope the book will educate younger generations in environmental awareness just as his grandfather taught him. His most recent book, Atchafalaya Autumn, details the personal accounts of his life in the swamps aboard a houseboat.

Along with his books, Guirard has conducted more than 150 slide shows in the last 15 years to various tourism and educational groups, including the Elder Hostel program, a nonprofit educating people 55 and older on the Basin's culture, industry, wildlife and entertainment. Impressed with Guirard's communication expertise and his academic background, Redel Miller, Lafayette's Elder Hostel director, applauds his commitment. "We trust him to do the right thing," says Miller. "He is the ambassador for the Cajun people."

Guirard shows no signs of slowing down this year's schedule: a new book release, Johnny Psychotherapy for Cajuns; a dramatic reading from the screenplay of The Land of Dead Giants at Festival International de Louisiane; the production at Cité des Arts of a play adapted from the same screenplay; another book, Inherit Atchafalaya, to be released in 2005. Guirard says he clings to hope that his beloved Basin can be preserved as he recalls some of the area's history in his book, Atchafalaya Autumn. "We've lost the battle to preserve any of the giant cypress trees. But the battle is not over and there is a chance to even restore the swamps and other wetlands of South Louisiana is not yet lost ... it's beyond economics; it is the welfare of the human spirit."

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